



Has the Presidential Campaign in Westport Gone Beyond Race?

October 27, 2008

Discussion Notes

Opening Comments

Welcome from TEAM Westport Chair Harold Bailey

Remarks and statistics from David L. Levinson, Ph.D, President, Norwalk Community College

Moderator: Judith Hamer, Ph.D:

Principles of an “Open Space” meeting:

- Whoever comes is the right people
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could happen
- Whenever it starts is the right time
- When it ends, it’s over

and The Law of Two Feet: Everyone has two feet; be prepared to use them.

For more on TEAM Westport, see www.teamwestport.org

For more on the process we used, see www.openspaceworld.com.

What Might Happen Next?

- Have another TEAM Westport-sponsored conversation after the election to talk about the results
- Think about what was discussed and reported tonight
- Use a speaker again, in the same way as Dr. Levinson spoke tonight
- Encourage students to come
 - Norwalk Community College
 - Staples High School

Small Group Discussion Notes

Group 1 – What is the potential for a retributive backlash among both Black and White Americans if Obama is elected (or not elected)?

- 1) Behind the honest expression of racism (on a recent National Public Radio segment in a Pennsylvania restaurant) was fear of “them” “getting back” at “us”.
- 2) Inside the idea of what was said by the woman interviewed was acknowledgement that “we” deserved retribution.
- 3) Will it be “rage” or “celebration”? (Our group thinks both reactions will cross the color line.)
- 4) Will Obama’s presidency affect racism in America, i.e., will he have time to address that issue among so many others on the next president’s plate?

Group 2 – Why does the mass media prey on citizens who may not be well read enough to know about a topic entirely?

- is the mass media presenting/representing stereotypes?
- with free speech (in the media) comes a lot of social responsibility that the media needs to be prepared to accept
- is the media preying on the public or feeding a demand?
- the media has the power to have major influence over the general public and sometimes abuses it
- in contrast, someone is only going to be susceptible to opinion and values they already hold

Group 3 – What would be the consequences of voting for or against Obama for the wrong reasons?

- voting for Obama because he is Black could be a step forward in the race issue
- it could also be negative because people won’t necessarily know what policies they are voting for
- fear is a factor, e.g., Black radicals, McCain’s health, Obama’s safety

- identity politics, i.e., is voting for (or against) Obama because he is Black any different from voting for (or against) a Catholic because he is Catholic (remember the JFK candidacy!)?

Group 4 – Are the college students (from Norwalk Community College) present at this conversation in a “post-race” generation?

- Yes, today’s students are less if at all racist and interact freely with other students regardless of race
- blurred lines between race and class distinctions
- what appears to be a complicated voting process may intimidate young, first-time voters

Group 5 – Can America overcome its deep-seated racism?

- It all starts with the family; that’s where attitudes toward others who are “different” first are developed
- importance of experiencing diversity among peer groups
- if “you have to be taught” to hate, you can be taught to celebrate differences, too

Group 6 – Are homogenous societies more functional?

group discussion cited diversity in America as a positive contributor to superpower status and a thriving nation

group discussion also cited Japan as similarly successful to the U.S. but also mentioned such social dysfunctions as sexual repression as possible consequences of a homogenous society (as opposed to American heterogeneity)

conclusion: heterogeneous societies are more culturally rich and healthier for their members. Supporting evidence for this can also be found in biology and the evolution of species

Group 7 – Will local elections be affected by the diversity in Fairfield County?

1) Yes. Nationally, Obama has galvanized new registrations, increasing the number of Democrats eligible to vote. We believe this to be true of Connecticut.

2) Ticket-splitting between Obama and Shays in the Connecticut's Fourth District is a real possibility, however, because of Shays' incumbent strength. Latest polls rate his race a toss-up.

3) There is a real possibility as well of Obama's doing less well in Westport (and Fairfield County) than in Connecticut overall because Westport has an older profile, is more affluent and probably does not have as many new Democratic registrations as the rest of Connecticut.

NB – all the topics proposed were discussed